The Illusion Of Perfection

The Rating Game Series

Book One

By Em Green and Sean O'Leary

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Prologue: The Illusion of Perfect

The world was never designed to be five stars.

At first, the system had seemed like a gift. A tool to sort through the endless choices, a way to distill excellence from mediocrity. Five stars—the pinnacle of achievement, the universal shorthand for quality, trust, and success.

But when everything depends on a perfect rating, what happens when you fall short?

For Elizabeth Harper, the answer had been swift and merciless. One poorly received book, a storm of negative reviews, and the algorithm had buried her. Once a rising name in self-publishing, she had become nothing more than a cautionary tale whispered in forums about how a single misstep could erase years of work.

J.R. Wolfe had played by the old rules, back when talent and patience mattered more than trending keywords. He had trusted in traditional publishing, in the slow grind of critical acclaim and word-of-mouth success. But now, he was learning the hard way that even literary fiction—the so-called art of the elite—was subject to the tyranny of stars.

Veronica Westcott, on the other hand, had never doubted where the power truly lay. She had watched the industry evolve from within, shifting her strategies, adapting, capitalizing on the new world order. Reviews could be bought, algorithms could be manipulated, and success could be engineered. She wasn't a storyteller—she was a tactician.

And then there were the gatekeepers, the unseen hands shaping the industry from within. Sebastián Locke, a marketing strategist with enough data at his fingertips to make or

break an author overnight. Vivian Sinclair, the publishing executive who had learned that a five-star system wasn't about literature—it was about control.

And finally, the ones who were untouchable: the wealthy, the well-connected, the writers who never had to wonder whether their books would be seen or forgotten. Julian Raines, the literary darling with an ironclad network of industry allies. Simone Vaughn, the recluse whose books sold not because of reviews, but because the world had already decided she was a genius.

Their lives, their ambitions, their paths bound together by a system none of them could escape.

A system that had once promised fairness but had become something else entirely—an illusion of perfection, designed to keep the

powerful in power and the desperate forever chasing stars.

And now, as the rules continued to shift, each of them would have to ask:

How far would they go to survive?

Chapter 1: The Gathering of Stars

Liz Harper couldn't shake the feeling that she didn't belong here.

She had thought it the moment she stepped into the Vespera House Literary Gala, a yearly event where authors, editors, and publishing elites clinked glasses and discussed who was still relevant and who had disappeared into obscurity.

Liz was dangerously close to becoming the latter.

Clutching a glass of cheap champagne served in an expensive flute, she stood near the back of the crowded ballroom, scanning the room for familiar faces. Everyone here had a perfect rating—or at least the illusion of one.

And then, she spotted him.

J.R. Wolfe.

Once, she had admired his literary success. Now, she envied the fact that his books were still visible, still discussed. He might not have been a blockbuster name, but he wasn't fighting the algorithm's death sentence the way she was.

But before she could debate whether to approach him, another voice—smooth, controlled—cut through the crowd.

Veronica Westcott.

"Liz, darling!" Veronica's voice carried, drawing the attention of the small, powerful circle around her.

Liz forced a smile as Veronica closed the distance, all grace and effortless confidence.

"Didn't expect to see you here," Veronica continued, leaning in with the kind of

familiarity that was just a little too warm to be genuine. “I thought you were… taking a break?”

Translation: I thought your career was dead.

Liz swallowed the bitterness that rose in her throat. “I wanted to reconnect. Stay in the loop.”

Veronica’s expression was full of polite amusement. “Of course. We have to stay visible, don’t we?”

Liz wasn’t sure if it was mockery or sympathy. Maybe both.

Before she could respond, a new voice joined them.

“Veronica,” J.R. Wolfe greeted smoothly, stepping into their circle. “Still managing to stay three steps ahead of the market, I see.”

Veronica flashed him a smile—one of calculated charm.

“You know me,” she replied. “Adapt or die.”

Liz watched as J.R. tilted his head, studying Veronica with the quiet skepticism of a man who still believed in writing for the sake of writing—but knew the game was rigged.

“You call it adapting,” he said, lifting his glass. “I call it… selective survival.”

Veronica merely laughed, unbothered. “And yet, here we all are. Surviving.”

Elsewhere in the room, Sebastián Locke was watching.

As Head of Marketing at Stratos Publishing, Sebastián understood the power dynamics in the industry better than anyone.

And right now? He was watching three very different authors interact—one struggling, one resisting, and one thriving.

Elizabeth Harper. The fallen self-publishing star.
J.R. Wolfe. The literary relic trying to stay relevant.
Veronica Westcott. The industry's golden manipulator.

Sebastián had seen these stories before. Some would rise again. Some would not.

And, as always, he would be the one deciding which.

As the night unfolded, Liz, J.R., and Veronica found themselves orbiting the same conversations—each of them aware that their survival depended on more than just talent.

Liz knew she needed to find a way back in.
J.R. needed to decide if he would play the game

or fade away.
And Veronica?

Veronica was already pulling the strings.

Liz swallowed the lump of embarrassment still stuck in her throat. She felt she should leave—she was good at convincing herself that this wasn't her world—but she hesitated, lingering near the polished banquet tables lining the edge of the grand hall. The hum of clinking glasses and controlled laughter filled the space, an exclusive rhythm she wasn't a part of, didn't fully understand but assumed that belonging meant success. She wanted in, she wanted to be successful.

Her fingers grazed the rim of an untouched champagne flute, but she wasn't foolish enough to think one sip would dull the sharp edges of this night. Instead, she drifted toward

a smaller table, one tucked into the shadows near the far wall, where a man sat alone.

Sebastián Locke.

He wasn't reading, wasn't scrolling his phone, wasn't talking to anyone—just sitting, turning a small, glossy cup between his fingers. The faintest curls of steam lifted from the dark liquid inside, the deep, earthy aroma reaching Liz before she was even close. She recognized the scent instantly.

She'd seen the ads, the minimalist storefronts. A brand that whispered sophistication, luxury. The kind of thing she always paused to admire but always hesitated to buy. The price did have some part in the hesitation, but mainly it was her own self doubt.

Sebastián lifted the cup to his lips, then, as if sensing her presence, stopped. Slowly, he turned his gaze toward her, assessing. Then—

too smoothly, too easily—he extended the cup in her direction, a lazy smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Careful,” he murmured, voice coated in dry amusement. “Not everyone has the palate for this.”

Liz hesitated. It was an invitation, but not a kind one. A test, maybe.

She took the cup before she could second-guess herself, the weight of it heavier than expected, warm against her fingertips. The aroma was immediately intoxicating. She hesitated just long enough to wonder if this was some elaborate joke, then took a sip.

The taste hit her like a slap—so rich, so deep, almost too bitter, the intensity bearing down against her tongue. Her throat seized as she struggled to swallow, her unaccustomed body betraying her with a single, sharp cough.

Sebastián watched, unreadable, before tilting his head slightly. “You all right?”

Liz cleared her throat, forcing a quick nod as she set the cup back down. “Fine. Thanks.”

She turned before he could say anything else, pushing through the crowd, her pulse quickening.

She needed to leave.

This time, she didn’t hesitate.

Chapter 2: The List That Kills Careers

The first time Liz Harper read the list, she thought she had imagined it.

She had left the Vespera House Literary Gala feeling uneasy but determined. Despite Veronica's subtle jabs, despite J.R.'s silent pity, she had reminded herself that she wasn't finished yet.

But then the email arrived.

INDUSTRY INSIDER REPORT: POWER & DECLINE IN PUBLISHING

The newsletter was anonymous—no one knew exactly who ran it, but every agent, publisher, and media outlet in the industry read it.

Liz scrolled past the Power List, a familiar roll call of the usual names—Veronica Westcott was ranked at #3, of course.

And then she saw it.

THE ENDANGERED LIST: Authors Who May Not Survive Another Year

Her name was there.

#7 – Elizabeth Harper (Former indie darling, now struggling to regain visibility after disappointing sales and low ratings.)

The words felt like a public death sentence.

The worst part? They weren't wrong.

J.R. Wolfe wasn't surprised when he saw the list.

The publishing industry loved two things: praise and prediction. And this particular list of doomed careers was one of its favorite annual traditions.

He had checked the Power List first, out of curiosity. As expected, his name wasn't there.

Then, the Endangered List.

Elizabeth Harper.

He frowned, glancing across the crowded café where he was supposed to be outlining his next novel. Instead, he was scrolling through publishing gossip like a desperate debut author.

J.R. had spoken to Liz for all of ten minutes last night at the gala, but it had been enough to see that she was drowning beneath the industry's impossible standards.

But here's the thing—he wasn't far behind her.

His book might not have flopped, but it also wasn't selling. 4.3 stars wasn't good enough. And the publishers had made it clear: his next book had to be marketable.

For the first time in his career, he was wondering whether his art had to come second to survival.

The bell above the café door chimed.

Liz spotted J.R. sitting alone, staring at his phone with the same exhausted, lost look she had seen in the mirror that morning.

Without fully thinking it through, she approached his table.

J.R. looked up, his brow raising slightly in recognition. “Liz.”

“You read it,” she said, slipping into the chair across from him.

He didn’t bother pretending. “Yeah.”

Liz exhaled, running a hand through her hair. “It’s like being told you have six months to live.”

J.R. smirked, but there was no humor in it. “More like three.”

They sat in silence for a moment, both absorbing the weight of the list.

Finally, J.R. set his phone down. “You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?”

Liz narrowed her eyes. “Thinking about what?”

J.R. studied her. “The only way to fix this.”

The words hung between them, unspoken but understood.

They had seen it happen before—authors who miraculously rebounded from career slumps, books that suddenly surged in ratings and visibility.

Because some people didn’t wait for success.

Some people bought it.

Liz’s stomach twisted. “You think I should?”

J.R. didn’t answer. Because he wasn’t sure if he should do it himself.

Chapter 3: Winning Before the Game Begins

Veronica Westcott believed in one rule above all others: Success is never about luck. It's about control.

That's why she was currently sitting in a private lounge, sipping a carefully measured rosé, waiting for Sebastián Locke—the man who held more power over publishing careers than most authors ever realized.

Sebastián arrived precisely four minutes late, a deliberate move, she was sure. A signal that his time was more valuable than hers.

Veronica smiled as he took the seat across from her. Nice try, Sebastián.

"Veronica," he greeted smoothly, setting down his drink. "You've been busy."

She crossed one leg over the other, the picture of effortless confidence. “It’s important to stay ahead.”

Sebastián smirked. “And how far ahead are you planning to be?”

Veronica tilted her head. “Let’s just say... I like to secure my place before the rankings are released.”

She placed her phone on the table, the screen lit with a list of pre-scheduled five-star reviews set to go live at strategic intervals throughout the next month.

Sebastián didn’t even blink. “Impressive.”

Veronica leaned in. “I know how this works, Sebastián. Five stars aren’t just earned. They’re arranged.”

Sebastián chuckled, taking a sip of his whiskey. “That’s why you’ll never be on the Endangered List.”

Veronica lifted her glass. “And why Liz Harper always will be.”

They clinked drinks.

Across the city, Liz sat at her apartment desk, staring at the review service website on her laptop screen.

J.R. had left the café an hour ago, both of them walking away without deciding whether they would take the easy way out.

But Liz couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She had played fair once before, believing that talent would carry her. It hadn’t.

And now, she was here. On the edge of vanishing.

Her cursor hovered over the “Purchase Verified Reviews” button.

She took a deep breath.

And clicked.

A confirmation email immediately arrived:

|10 Verified Five-Star Reviews Scheduled for Release in the Next 48 Hours |

Her stomach twisted, but she ignored it.

It’s just a boost, she told herself. Just enough to get seen again.

Liz closed her laptop and exhaled.

The worst part?

She felt relief.

Chapter 4: The Deal With the Devil

The email sat unread in J.R.'s inbox for over an hour before he finally worked up the nerve to open it.

It was from Stratos Publishing, a boutique publisher known for aggressive marketing tactics—and for pushing books into the coveted 4.7+ star range by any means necessary.

> J.R.,
>
> We love your work and believe you have the potential to be a major name in literary fiction—if positioned correctly. We'd like to discuss acquiring your next book, but we need to ensure it aligns with current reader expectations.
>
> A call would be the best way to discuss our reader-friendly approach. Let us know when you're available.

Marian Tate
Acquisitions Editor, Stratos Publishing

J.R. exhaled sharply, leaning back in his chair.

Reader-friendly approach.

Translation? They want a book that feeds the algorithm.

He should have deleted the email. But he didn't.

Instead, he typed out a response.

At exactly 9:00 AM, Veronica Westcott’s pre-arranged reviews started appearing across multiple book platforms.

By noon, her book had climbed three spots on the bestseller list.

By 5:00 PM, she was trending.

And by midnight, her new novel had officially crossed into 4.9-star territory.

She wasn’t just winning the game. She was rewriting the rules.

But Veronica knew success wasn’t just about ratings—it was about perception.

Which was why she had leaked the “Endangered List” to a select group of industry insiders before it was published.

She had made sure Liz Harper’s name was on it.

Veronica didn’t hate Liz. She just wasn’t going to let her become a comeback story.

In publishing, only one narrative mattered—the one that survived.

And Veronica always made sure that narrative belonged to her.

J.R. texted Liz before he could overthink it.

J.R.: You home?

Liz: Yeah. What’s up?

J.R.: Coming over.

Twenty minutes later, Liz opened the door to a J.R. who looked like he had just made a deal with the devil.

He stepped inside, ran a hand through his hair, and got straight to the point.

"I got an offer."

Liz frowned. "A publishing offer?"

J.R. nodded, dropping onto her couch. "They want to sign me, but only if I write something that… fits their system."

Liz exhaled. “Algorithm-friendly?”

J.R. smirked bitterly. “They didn’t use the word, but yeah. That’s exactly what they mean.”

Silence.

Liz could feel it hanging between them—the question neither of them wanted to say out loud.

Was it really selling out if it was the only way to survive?

J.R. finally spoke. “Tell me the truth, Liz. Would you do it?”

Liz hesitated.

Then she thought about the confirmation email sitting in her inbox—the one proving that she already had.

She couldn’t tell him the truth.

So she did what every struggling author did at some point.

She lied.

“I don’t know,” she whispered.

J.R. studied her for a long moment before nodding.

Liz wondered if he saw right through her.

Chapter 5: The First Taste of Success

Liz woke up the next morning to a flood of notifications.

Her book—the one that had been slipping into obscurity—was suddenly rising.

Her rating had jumped from 3.9 to 4.5 overnight.

The reviews had begun rolling in:

“Absolutely breathtaking! Five stars.”

“A must-read! Couldn’t put it down.”

“One of my favorite books of the year. Five stars.”

Liz stared at the screen, heart pounding.

It was working.

The invisible wall that had kept her book buried was crumbling, and for the first time in months, she felt like she existed again.

Then her eyes caught something at the bottom of the review page.

A real review.

“Honestly, this book was just okay. Not bad, but nothing special. 3 stars.”

It was buried beneath the fakes, but still, it felt like a punch to the ribs.

She exhaled sharply and closed her laptop.

The guilt tried to creep in, but she shut it down.

If Veronica and every other bestselling author played the game, why shouldn’t she?

Success wasn’t about being the best. It was about being seen.

J.R. sat in front of his laptop, staring at the document labeled: “Stratos Outline.”

His new publisher had sent it over that morning. It wasn’t just guidance—it was a blueprint.

Shorter chapters for pacing.

A dramatic twist every 20 pages.

A main character who aligns with trending reader demographics.

A romance subplot—even if unnecessary.

J.R. rubbed his temples.

He had always believed in literary integrity, in writing for art, not trends.

But now, he had signed a contract.

And he had bills to pay.

The cursor blinked.

J.R. cracked his knuckles.

And then he did something he had sworn he'd never do.

He started writing for the algorithm.

Later that evening, Liz received a text from Veronica.

| Veronica: Dinner. 8PM. Don't be late.|

Liz almost ignored it. She knew what it meant. Veronica had seen her sudden rating jump and was ready to remind her who ran this game.

Still, Liz showed up. Because saying no to Veronica Westcott was never a good idea.

The restaurant was private, expensive, carefully curated for people who mattered.

Veronica was already there, wine glass in hand, watching Liz approach with a look that said she knew everything.

Liz slid into the seat across from her. “You’re in a good mood.”

Veronica smirked. “Of course. I love watching people finally realize how things actually work.”

Liz stiffened.

Veronica leaned in, voice soft but sharp. “Tell me, Liz. How does it feel?”

Liz swallowed. “How does what feel?”

Veronica twirled the stem of her wine glass between her fingers. “Lying to yourself.”

Liz’s pulse quickened.

Veronica chuckled. “Relax. I don’t blame you. I just hope you understand that once you start? You don’t stop.”

Liz felt like she was suffocating.

Veronica took a slow sip of her wine before setting the glass down. “Just be careful,” she mused. “You wouldn’t want the wrong people finding out what you’ve been up to.”

It wasn’t a warning.

It was a reminder that Veronica was always watching.

Chapter 6: The Price of Perfection

Liz walked out of the restaurant, heart still pounding from Veronica's veiled threat.

She pulled her phone from her bag, re-reading the message from the anonymous number.

> | I know what you did. |

A sharp gust of wind cut through the city streets, but it wasn't the cold that made her shiver.

She glanced around. No one was looking at her. No one seemed suspicious.

Was this a bluff? A warning from Veronica? Or had someone—a real reader—noticed the sudden influx of flawless five-star reviews?

She shoved her phone into her coat pocket and kept walking.

She wouldn't panic. Not yet.

Instead, she told herself the same thing she had told herself when she bought the reviews.

Just a boost. Just to get visible again.

She wasn't like Veronica.

This wasn't who she was.

Was it?

J.R. sat at his desk, fingers hovering over the keyboard, the cursor blinking at the top of a new page.

This book didn't feel like his.

He had been writing for hours, forcing himself to follow Stratos Publishing's prescribed formula—tighter pacing, stronger emotional hooks, a protagonist designed to "appeal to the widest demographic".

Everything about it felt… false.

And yet, as he re-read what he had written, he realized something that made his stomach turn.

It was good.

Not because it was his best work, but because it was exactly the kind of book the system rewarded.

J.R. exhaled slowly.

If he could make peace with this, if he could just accept that this was what publishing had become…

He might actually succeed.

But at what cost?

Veronica had two phones.

One was the public-facing device, filled with publishing deals, interview requests, and

messages from her curated circle of industry allies.

The other?

It was for business that didn’t officially exist.

She tapped the screen, opening a secure messaging app.

A single message sat in her inbox.

> | The reviews came in as expected. She moved up in ranking. What do you want to do next? |

Veronica smirked, taking a sip of her drink.

Liz thought she was being careful. Thought she was making her own choices.

But Veronica had been orchestrating this entire thing from the start.

She tapped a response.

| Give her just enough rope. Let’s see if she hangs herself. |

She pressed send.

And waited.

Liz had barely slept.

The anonymous message kept replaying in her mind.

She needed to talk to someone.

And the only person she could think of was J.R.

She showed up at his apartment the next afternoon, knocking twice before he answered.

The second he saw her face, his expression shifted from mild surprise to concern.

“What happened?” he asked, stepping aside to let her in.

Liz walked past him and sank onto his couch, rubbing her hands together.

“Someone knows.”

J.R. shut the door. “Knows what?”

She exhaled, staring at her knees. “About the reviews.”

J.R. stiffened.

For a long moment, he didn’t say anything. Then, finally:

“How bad is it?”

Liz lifted her head. “Bad enough.”

J.R. ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think it was—?”

“Veronica?” Liz finished bitterly. “Of course. Who else?”

J.R. swore under his breath.

Liz swallowed hard. “I don’t know what to do.”

J.R. sat beside her, his voice quiet. “You have two choices, Liz. You can get ahead of this… or you can let Veronica decide what happens next.”

Liz looked at him, really looked at him, for the first time since their conversation at the café.

Something was different.

She recognized the look in his eyes.

It was the look of someone who had already made compromises.

“J.R.,” she said carefully, “what have you done?”

J.R. hesitated.

Then, for the first time, he admitted it out loud.

“I took the deal.”

Liz’s stomach dropped.

Chapter 7: A House Built on Sand

Liz should have felt victorious.

Her book had finally broken into the top 100 on the platform, her ranking climbing with every new five-star review.

The visibility boost was working. Readers who had never noticed her before were actually buying her book now, and she could see the impact in her sales dashboard.

But the message—I know what you did—was still unread in her inbox, a ticking bomb waiting to go off.

She had stared at it for hours, debating whether to respond, delete it, or ignore it entirely.

Her gut told her that whoever sent it wasn’t bluffing.

And then, another notification appeared.

A one-star review.

It sat there, ugly and glaring beneath the sea of manufactured five-star ratings.

> | “This book is getting way too many perfect scores for something so mediocre. I’m guessing someone is buying reviews. I won’t support fraud. One star.” |

Liz felt her stomach turn.

If this picked up traction, if other readers started questioning her sudden rise, everything would come crashing down.

She had two choices:

- Let it play out and hope it dies in the noise of other reviews.
- Bury it.

Her hands trembled as she logged into her review service account.

The company had options—not just for boosting books but for suppressing negative feedback.

For an extra $250, she could have the review flagged and removed within 24 hours.

Liz’s pulse pounded.

She was already in deep. What was one more step?

Her mouse hovered over the “Suppress Negative Feedback” button.

She clicked it.

And just like that, the one-star review disappeared.

J.R. leaned back in his chair, staring at the manuscript that didn't feel like his own.

The protagonist was charming, universally likable, the kind of character that focus groups approved of.

The plot moved at breakneck speed, every chapter ending in a hook that ensured readers never put the book down for too long.

And the romance?

Inserted on page 75, just as the Stratos Publishing notes had suggested.

Everything about this book was optimized for success.

It was also the least personal thing he had ever written.

His mind flashed back to the conversation with Liz. What have you done?

And for the first time, he wondered if he was already too far gone to turn back.

A knock at his door pulled him out of his thoughts.

He expected Liz—maybe returning with more guilt, more confessions.

Instead, it was Sebastián Locke.

J.R. blinked. “Sebastián.”

Sebastián stepped inside without waiting for an invitation.

He glanced at J.R.’s screen, smirked. “So. You’ve finally stopped fighting it.”

J.R. exhaled through his nose. “Didn’t realize I had a choice.”

Sebastián clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Now you’re starting to understand publishing.”

J.R. should have hated the words.

Instead, he hated how much they felt like the truth.

Veronica sat in her penthouse office, sipping a perfectly brewed espresso while reviewing the week's industry data.

Liz Harper's book had officially entered the top 100.

Veronica smirked.

That meant Liz had taken the bait.

It was always the same pattern. Desperate authors believed they were in control, that they were gaming the system, when in reality, they were simply playing into a game Veronica had already mastered.

She tapped her keyboard, pulling up the flagged review report.

Liz had removed a negative review.

Veronica’s smirk deepened.

Good girl. Now, let’s see what happens when you realize you can’t erase everything.

She picked up her phone and dialed a contact.

“Hey,” she said, voice smooth. “I need a little favor.”

Chapter 8: The First Crack in the Foundation

Liz knew something was wrong the moment she checked her social media notifications.

She had spent the night trying to convince herself that everything was fine. That burying one bad review wasn't a crime. That boosting her book's ranking was just a way to even the playing field.

But then she saw the blog post.

> | **INDIE SCANDAL: Are These Five-Star Books Actually Fake? |**

She clicked the link, pulse racing.

Her name wasn't in the headline, but it might as well have been.

Several authors had been flagged for suspicious activity, their sudden rating jumps raising questions about manipulated reviews.

The article pointed out how some books had near-perfect scores but generic, repetitive praise—a classic sign of purchased ratings.

And at the bottom? A list of authors suspected of boosting their books.

Elizabeth Harper was #3 on the list.

Her stomach dropped.

Her inbox was flooded. Some messages were concerned (“Liz, is this true?”), others were furious (“I trusted you!”), and some were downright vicious (“Fake author. Fake success. Hope you disappear.”).

She checked her book’s page. Two new one-star reviews had already appeared.

“This author is a scammer. Won’t be supporting this trash.”

“Ratings manipulation? Pass. One star.”

Liz’s hands shook as she locked her phone.

This wasn’t just a bad review.

This was the start of a takedown.

And she had no idea who was behind it.

Except, she did.

Veronica. That selfish, miserable, self-serving, narcissistic bitch.

J.R. hadn’t seen the article yet.

Because J.R. was drunk.

Not stumbling, not sloppy—just enough whiskey in his system to take the edge off the self-loathing.

He had turned in his first three chapters to Stratos Publishing that afternoon. They had responded within the hour.

> | This is perfect. Exactly what we're looking for. Keep going. |

J.R. read the words, waiting for relief.

It never came.

Instead, all he felt was disgust.

He barely recognized the book he was writing. It was too clean, too polished, too algorithm-friendly. It wasn't his.

But it was working.

His agent had called an hour later with the news—the publisher was already making plans for a promotional push. They were that confident in the book.

J.R. had smiled. Had thanked them. Had poured himself another drink.

Because he knew the truth.

He was losing himself.

And maybe, just maybe—he wasn't sure he cared anymore.

Veronica leaned back in her chair, watching the blog post go viral.

She took a slow sip of wine, perfectly content.

Liz thought she was playing the game.

She had no idea that Veronica had been controlling it from the start.

She had leaked the names to the blog herself—not all of them, just the ones that served her interests.

Liz's mistake?

Thinking she could rise in the rankings without permission.

Veronica had no problem with authors bending the rules. She did it herself.

But she had a rule.

Only the smart ones get away with it.

Liz had been too obvious. How could that cutes, doe-eyed little ditz ever think she could compete?

Veronica had just given the industry a gentle nudge, ensuring Liz's downfall would happen in public.

Now, all she had to do was wait.

She'll come running, crying, needing a Fendi shoulder to cry on. Let's not wear the Fendi when that happens. I'd want to be comfortable while I'm being comforting.

Veronica can be patient when she needed to be. Because once an author is labeled a fraud, they never recover.

Liz's hands were still shaking when she called J.R.

He answered on the third ring. His voice was slightly slurred.

"Liz?"

She barely got the words out. "Did you see it?"

J.R. frowned. "See what?"

"The article. The… the blog post."

There was a pause. Then the rustling of movement. She pictured him pulling his laptop closer, typing.

Then silence.

"…Liz," he finally said. "What did you do?"

Liz clenched her teeth. “I didn’t— I mean, I—”

J.R. exhaled hard. “Oh man, Liz…”

She hated the disappointment in his voice.

“I need help,” she whispered.

J.R. didn’t respond right away.

Then, finally: “Okay. Meet me tomorrow.”

Liz closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

J.R. didn’t say anything else.

But when he hung up, he poured himself another drink.

Because helping Liz meant facing the truth about himself.

Chapter 9: Fighting The Tides

Liz barely slept.

By the time the sun rose, her name was everywhere.

The blog post had spread—industry forums, Twitter threads, Facebook groups. Readers were dissecting her rating spike, other authors were distancing themselves, and self-publishing skeptics were holding her up as proof that “indie success is always a scam.”

She needed a plan.

So she did what every public figure did when caught in a scandal.

She studied how others had survived.

> Option 1: Ignore it and wait for the news cycle to move on. (Risky. The damage could stick.)

Option 2: Deny everything. (But if proof surfaced, she was done.)

Option 3: Admit a ‘mistake’ but control the narrative. (Turn the scandal into a redemption story.)

Liz clicked open a blank post.

Her hands hovered over the keyboard.

Then she began to type.

“I want to address the conversation happening around my book. I’ve always believed in honest reviews and real reader engagement. While I did experiment with marketing strategies to boost visibility, I never intended to deceive anyone. I value my readers, and I take responsibility for my actions. I’ll be reevaluating my approach moving forward.”

She read it twice.

It wasn’t a full confession. But it was enough.

She pressed post.

Now all she could do was wait.

J.R. was already at the café when Liz arrived.

He had seen her statement online. He had watched the reaction unfold in real-time.

Some people appreciated her honesty. Others called it damage control bullsh*t.

One thing was clear: Liz’s reputation was now permanently tied to this scandal.

She sat across from him, exhausted, tense, waiting for judgment.

J.R. set down his coffee. “You did what you had to do.”

Liz exhaled sharply. “It doesn’t feel like it’s enough.”

J.R. leaned forward. “It won’t be. But it’s something.”

She studied him. “What about you?”

J.R. hesitated. Then, against his better judgment, he told her the truth.

“I turned in my chapters to Stratos,” he admitted. “They love it.”

Liz frowned. “That’s good, right?”

J.R. forced a bitter laugh. “Yeah. If I ignore the fact that it’s a book I’d never actually read.”

Liz stared at him. “Then why are you doing this?”

J.R. rubbed his jaw. “Because this industry isn’t built for people like us anymore.”

Liz fell silent. Because she knew he was right.

They were both playing a game they hadn't designed.

And they were both starting to lose themselves in the process.

Veronica didn't react immediately to Liz's statement.

She waited.

She let the industry speculate, argue, and build their own narrative first.

Then she made her move.

Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she typed out a perfectly crafted message.

> | "I've been in this industry long enough to know that authors—especially women—face intense scrutiny. Liz made a mistake. We all have. But let's not pretend

the system isn’t designed to force authors into impossible situations. Let’s hold the real problem accountable—the pressure to game the system just to survive.” |

She pressed post.

Within minutes, her followers were praising her wisdom.

Veronica wasn’t just staying ahead of the conversation—she was controlling it.

By defending Liz publicly, she looked like the benevolent industry leader.

But privately?

She was watching to see if Liz would sink or swim.

Chapter 10: A Dangerous Offer

The message sat on Liz’s screen like a trap she could see but still wanted to walk into.

> | "I can make this go away. But it’s going to cost you." |

The number was unknown, but she had a feeling whoever was behind it knew exactly what they were doing.

She hesitated, fingers trembling as she typed back.

> | "Who is this?" |

Three dots appeared. Then a response.

> | "Someone who understands how this business works. Call me." |

A phone number followed.

Liz’s stomach churned.

She knew she should delete it. Ignore it. Take whatever fallout was coming her way and fight through it honestly.

But she was tired of losing.

She stared at the screen for a full minute.

Then, before she could change her mind, she pressed call.

The line clicked, and a voice—calm, measured, and unmistakably male—answered.

“Elizabeth Harper. I was wondering when you’d stop pretending you had another option.”

Liz’s breath hitched. “Who are you?”

A quiet chuckle. “Someone who cleans up messes.”

Her grip tightened on the phone. “And what exactly is it going to cost me?”

The voice was smooth. Effortless.

“Nothing you haven’t already lost.”

J.R. wasn’t drinking tonight.

Not because he didn’t want to, but because he needed a clear head for what he was about to do.

Stratos Publishing had scheduled a call with marketing—a discussion about his ‘branding strategy’ moving forward.

The book wasn’t even finished, and they were already talking cover design, PR interviews, influencer campaigns.

And every word of it made J.R. feel like he was drowning in something he couldn’t escape.

When the call finally ended, his inbox pinged with a new email.

| Stratos Marketing Team
| Subject: Promotional Adjustments – Your Author Profile

J.R. scanned the email.

The publishers wanted to "tweak" his bio—make his backstory more compelling for readers.

His college years? Too boring.

His early rejections? Too unrelatable.

His “brand” needed a struggle readers could root for.

J.R. gritted his teeth. They weren’t just shaping his book. They were rewriting him.

He slammed his laptop shut.

For the first time, he wondered how much of himself he’d have left when this was over.

Veronica wasn’t worried about Liz.

She had predicted every move she’d made so far.

The fake reviews. The panicked response. The damage control statement.

Liz was following a script she didn’t even realize had been written for her.

Veronica leaned back in her chair, glancing at her own book rankings.

Still at 4.9 stars. Still untouchable.

She smirked.

Then her phone buzzed.

A message from Sebastián Locke.

| “She took the bait.” |

Veronica smiled.

Of course, she did.

Chapter 11: Deals With Devils

The instructions were simple and precise.

> Meet at the Central Hotel, Room 1723.
>
> Come alone.
>
> Don’t tell anyone.

Liz had debated ignoring the message.

But the moment she saw another one-star review calling her a fraud, her resolve crumbled.

So here she was.

Standing outside Room 1723, heart pounding, fingers hesitating over the door handle.

She took a deep breath, then knocked twice.

The door opened immediately.

And there, standing with a glass of whiskey in one hand and an amused smirk on his lips, was

Sebastián Locke.

Liz's stomach dropped.

Sebastián—publishing's unseen puppet master, the man who controlled marketing, influence, and book rankings with the precision of a surgeon.

She had known someone powerful was behind this.

But she hadn't expected him.

Sebastián gestured inside. "Are you coming in, or would you rather have this conversation in the hallway?"

Liz clenched her jaw and stepped inside.

The room was expensive, minimalist, intimidating—just like the man who occupied it.

Sebastián poured himself another drink, taking his time before speaking.

“I assume you’re smart enough to know why you’re here,” he said, taking a sip.

Liz forced herself to hold his gaze. “You said you could make this go away.”

Sebastián smiled. “I can.”

Liz exhaled, forcing down the unease curling in her stomach. “How?”

Sebastián set his glass down. “It’s simple. I have access to the right platforms, the right reviewers, and the right people. One call, and every negative article about you disappears.”

Liz’s breath hitched. “And in return?”

Sebastián’s smirk deepened. “You’ll owe me.”

Liz’s pulse pounded in her ears. “Owe you what?”

Sebastián leaned back, studying her. “Consider it… an investment. One day, I’ll need something from you. And when I do, you’ll say yes.”

Liz’s throat tightened. This wasn’t a deal. It was a leash.

She could walk away.

Take the scandal, fight through the mud, hope to rebuild from the ashes.

Or she could accept Sebastián’s offer…

And trade one form of obscurity for another.

Liz swallowed hard.

And nodded.

Sebastián grinned. “Smart girl.”

J.R. sat at his desk, reading his own bio like a stranger.

Stratos Publishing had sent over his revised author profile, and it was a fictionalized version of himself.

He had struggled in obscurity for years (a lie—his first book had landed an agent right away).

He had nearly given up writing before this big break (he had never stopped writing, never even paused).

His book was a deeply personal story based on his own emotional journey (except it wasn't, because it wasn't even his story anymore).

J.R. clenched his jaw.

They weren't just publishing his book.

They were rebranding his existence.

His phone buzzed. His agent.

> | "This is going to be big for you, J.R. Don't overthink it." |

J.R. laughed bitterly.

Too late.

He walked to the kitchen, poured himself a drink, and toasted to the version of himself he was about to lose.

Veronica already knew the outcome before Liz did.

Sebastián had texted her the second Liz left his hotel room.

| “She took the deal.” |

Veronica smirked.

Liz had stepped into the trap willingly.

Now, she belonged to Sebastián. Which meant, soon enough…

She’d finally belong to Veronica.

The next phase of the game had begun.

Chapter 12: The Vanishing Scandal

Liz woke up to silence.

No notifications. No hate comments. No emails questioning her integrity.

For the first time in weeks, the storm was gone.

She opened her laptop, searching for the article that had started it all.

404 ERROR – PAGE NOT FOUND.

She checked the forums, the industry blogs, even the one-star reviews.

All of them? Gone.

Her breath came in shallow, uneven bursts.

It was real. Sebastián had delivered.

But instead of relief, all she felt was terror.

Because now, she owed him.

And she had no idea when he would come to collect.

J.R. couldn’t do it.

The publisher’s marketing team had scheduled his first official author interview—an exclusive with a major book podcast.

The questions had been sent over in advance. All pre-approved.

- Tell us about your journey as a struggling writer.
- How did you find the inspiration for your novel?
- What personal experiences influenced this story?

J.R. read the list twice before closing his laptop.

Every answer he was expected to give? A lie.

He had been handed a script, and all he had to do was smile and read his lines.

He poured himself a drink instead.

Veronica checked Liz’s book rankings.

Still climbing.

Her book was out of scandal territory, and sales were steady.

Veronica leaned back in her chair, satisfied.

Liz might think she had escaped the worst of it.

But Veronica knew better.

Sebastián never erased a debt without expecting something bigger in return.

And when that time came?

Veronica would be watching.

Chapter 13: A Favor You Can’t Refuse

Liz had been living in false peace for exactly five days.

The silence had felt unnatural, like the eye of a hurricane, and now?

The storm was coming.

She stared at the text from Sebastián.

> | Hope you’re enjoying the quiet. We’ll talk soon. |

Liz’s stomach twisted.

She had been waiting for this. Dreading it.

A second text followed.

> | Tonight. 7PM. Beacon Club. Don’t be late. |

Liz closed her eyes.

There was no backing out.

J.R. adjusted the cuffs of his blazer, resisting the urge to check his reflection in the polished elevator doors. The quiet hum of the lift carried him upward, higher into the heart of the luxury hotel, a hotel so pristine it felt like a curated illusion. The kind of place where the carpets absorbed footsteps, the lighting softened imperfections, and the air smelled of money—not new, desperate wealth, but old, effortless privilege.

He should've been nervous, but instead, a thin smile played at his lips. This was where real deals happened—not in the frantic halls of publishing expos or over frantic emails, but here, in private suites, behind doors only a select few were ever invited through.

The elevator doors slid open without a sound, revealing a hushed, marble-lined corridor. At the far end, a pair of gilded double doors stood slightly ajar, offering a glimpse inside a suite

designed for power plays—a private lounge with low leather chairs, floor-to-ceiling windows framing the skyline, and a bottle of champagne chilling in a silver ice bucket, already anticipating a celebration.

J.R. exhaled slowly, adjusting his tie as he stepped forward.

This was it. J.R. showed up for the interview.

Not because he wanted to, but because Stratos Publishing had made it very clear that this was part of the deal.

The podcast studio was assembled within the hotel's business suites, in front of a modern, sleek shelf, full of books he didn't recognize—because they were all algorithm-approved bestsellers.

He sat in front of the microphone. The host—a cheerful, well-groomed man in a blazer that

screamed marketability—smiled at him.

“J.R. Wolfe, everyone! The next big voice in literary fiction. J.R., tell us—how does it feel to finally make it?”

J.R. forced a smile.

He had two choices:

- Say what they wanted.
- Say what was true.0

He hesitated just a second too long.

The host’s smile froze, just slightly. A warning.

J.R. swallowed.

And then, with the weight of everything he had already sacrificed, he said the words he knew weren’t his.

“It feels like a dream come true.”

The exclusive club was dimly lit, full of people who mattered—industry leaders, authors who never had to struggle, people who never worried about algorithms.

Sebastián was waiting for her in a private booth, a drink in front of him, looking completely at ease.

Liz slid into the seat across from him, pulse hammering.

Sebastián smiled. Like he had already won.

“I assume you know why we’re here,” he said, sipping his drink.

Liz’s mouth was dry. “I don’t.”

Sebastián chuckled. “Come on, Liz. We both know nothing comes for free.”

She swallowed. “What do you want?”

Sebastián leaned forward. “A favor. A small one. And in return, you get to keep your career.”

Liz’s hands curled into fists under the table.

“What kind of favor?”

Sebastián set down his glass.

“There’s a book coming out next month. A debut indie novel. I need you to make sure it doesn’t succeed.”

Liz blinked. “What?”

Sebastián’s smile never wavered.

“I need you to leave a few negative reviews. Stir up some doubt. Nothing obvious. Just… a little nudge in the right direction.”

Liz’s stomach flipped.

She had lied for herself. Justified her own decisions.

But this?

Destroying someone else just to keep what she had?

She shook her head. “No.”

Sebastián didn’t look surprised.

Just… amused.

“You misunderstand.” He leaned in. “This isn’t a request.”

Liz felt the room closing in on her.

Because she knew—if she refused, Sebastián wouldn’t just let her go.

Chapter 14: The Devil’s Deadline

Liz sat in her apartment, staring at the glowing screen of her laptop.

It was 11:42 PM.

Eighteen minutes until Sebastián’s deadline.

She had typed out the negative review twice.

And deleted it twice.

The book Sebastián wanted her to destroy was a debut indie novel by an unknown author.

A year ago, that had been her.

And now, she was being asked to do to them what had almost been done to her.

Liz ran a hand through her hair, heart hammering.

She had three options:

- Write the review, keep her career.

- Ignore the deadline and wait for Sebastián's punishment.
- Fight back.

A notification popped up.

|Sebastián Locke: Tick tock, Liz. |

She squeezed her eyes shut.

And then, with seconds left on the clock, she made her decision.

J.R. sat across from his agent, listening to a conversation about himself that didn't feel real.

"We're going to push for a literary award nomination," his agent was saying. "The publisher thinks your book has a shot."

J.R. gripped his coffee cup.

His book.

Except… it didn't feel like his.

He had followed every note, every suggested edit, turned himself into a brand instead of a writer.

And now?

Now, the machine was working in his favor.

So why did it feel like he had already lost?

His agent noticed his silence. “J.R.?”

J.R. blinked. Forced a nod.

“Yeah. That’s… great news.”

But even as he said it, he realized something.

Success wasn’t supposed to feel this empty.

Veronica was already watching the situation unfold.

She had multiple alerts set up—whenever certain names, books, or topics started

trending.

Right now, Liz’s name wasn’t trending.

Which meant one of two things:

- She did what Sebastián asked.
- She was about to be erased.

Veronica tapped her nails against her desk, waiting.

It was always so fascinating watching people reach their breaking points.

And Liz’s was coming fast.

Liz’s fingers hovered over the keyboard.

And then… she started typing.

But not what Sebastián had asked for.

Instead, she opened her blog—the one she had abandoned months ago.

And she wrote the truth.

> | The publishing industry is built on an illusion. I know, because I’ve been part of it. I’ve bent the rules. I’ve made mistakes. And now, someone powerful wants me to cross a line I can’t come back from. I refuse. And if I disappear after this, you’ll know why. |

She hit publish.

And waited for the fallout.

Chapter 15: The The Fallout Begins

The blog post went live at 11:59 PM.

By 6:00 AM, the world had already found it.

Her inbox was flooded—half outrage, half praise.

Some called her brave. Others called her a liar, a fraud, a desperate author looking for attention.

By 10:00 AM, her book's sales dropped by 30%.

By noon, her publisher emailed her.

> | "Liz, we need to talk. Urgent." |

She stared at the message, pulse thudding in her ears.

She had told the truth.

And now?

She was about to lose everything.

J.R. was supposed to be celebrating.

His publisher had just finalized his book’s first major campaign deal.

His agent had confirmed that his name was on a short list for a prestigious literary award.

Everything he had ever wanted was finally happening.

But instead of feeling victorious, he felt hollow.

Because it wasn’t his success.

It was a product. A persona.

And now, as he scrolled through Liz’s blog post, something inside him cracked.

She had told the truth.

Something he hadn’t had the courage to do.

J.R. set his phone down.

And for the first time in months, he wondered if he had already lost himself completely.

Veronica had seen the blog post the second it went live.

She had expected Liz to crack.

She had even planned for it.

But she had not expected Liz to go public like this.

That was bold. Stupid. Dangerous.

And it couldn’t go unanswered.

Veronica picked up her phone and dialed Sebastián.

The call barely rang before he answered.

“She made her choice,” Sebastián said, voice calm.

Veronica smiled, cold and sharp.

“Then let’s remind her what happens to people who don’t follow the rules.”

Chapter 16: Erased

Liz woke up with a pit in her stomach.

Something felt off.

She reached for her phone and checked her book sales.

Nothing.

Her book’s entire listing was gone.

Not just from one site, but from all major retailers.

She tried refreshing, logging out, logging back in.

Still nothing.

Her entire career had been wiped overnight.

Her hands shook as she checked her email.

One new message.

| Sebastián Locke: “Actions have consequences.” |

Liz’s stomach dropped.

She had expected retaliation—but not like this.

Not this fast.

Not complete erasure.

Her pulse pounded as she dialed J.R.’s number.

He picked up on the second ring.

“Liz?” His voice was sharp. “What’s wrong?”

She swallowed hard. “They took my book down.”

J.R. went silent.

Then: “I’m coming over.”

J.R. didn’t hesitate.

By the time he arrived at Liz's apartment, she looked like she had been up all night.

He had seen career sabotage before—but this?

This was total destruction.

"They want me gone," Liz whispered.

J.R. clenched his jaw. "They don't just want you gone. They want you forgotten."

He had spent months convincing himself that playing by their rules was the only way to survive.

But now?

Watching Liz get wiped out in real time?

It made him sick.

He had sold his soul to Stratos Publishing for security.

And now, he was realizing—that security came at the cost of his own voice.

His phone buzzed.

A text from his agent.

|“J.R., I need to know where you stand on the Elizabeth Harper situation before the publisher does.”|

J.R. stared at the message.

They were forcing his hand.

Pick a side.

Either he aligned himself with the machine, or he threw his career into the fire alongside Liz.

For the first time in months, J.R. knew exactly what he had to do.

He turned to Liz.

“I’m done lying.”

Veronica sat at her oak desk, sipping her espresso as she watched the fallout unfold.

Liz's disappearance from the market had happened flawlessly.

Sebastián had delivered.

The industry was already moving on.

And now?

Now, she just had to wait for Liz to fade into irrelevance.

But then—a new notification.

A blog post. From J.R. Wolfe.

Veronica clicked the link.

The headline hit her like a slap.

|"**The Truth About Publishing: What They Don't Want You to Know**."|

Veronica's grip on her coffee cup tightened.

J.R. had just blown up the entire system.

And for the first time in a long time…

Veronica Westcott was not in control.

Liz looked at the last of her unfinished manuscripts sadly and lovingly.

Will I ever get to publish them in this system? I can’t think it’s over. The five-star world has chewed me up and spat me out. No publisher, no audience, no future.

J.R. Is right. We need to use our voices or else why bother writing anymore.

Her phone vibrates. A new email. No subject line. No sender name.

She almost ignores it, but something makes her open it.

| "They built the five-star system to control you. But the ones who see beyond it? They win."

"S.O.L.L. is coming." |

Liz stares at the screen, a chill creeping down her spine.

Who the hell is SOLL?

Chapter 17: The War for Truth

Liz read J.R.'s blog post twice.

It wasn't just a confession—it was a declaration of war.

He had called out Stratos Publishing, the manipulation of the five-star system, and the way authors were forced into silence.

And most importantly?

He had named names.

> *Sebastián Locke.*
> *Stratos Publishing.*
> *Veronica Westcott.*

Liz exhaled sharply.

J.R. had just put a target on his back.

Her phone rang.

J.R.

She answered. “You’re insane.”

J.R. laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Maybe.”

Liz pressed a hand to her forehead. “They’re going to bury you for this.”

“I know,” J.R. said. “That’s why we can’t back down now.”

Liz’s pulse quickened.

He was right.

They had one chance to fight back.

And they had to take it before it was too late.

Veronica slammed her laptop shut.

J.R. Wolfe had just done the one thing she couldn’t ignore.

He had made himself a problem.

Sebastián's name flashed on her phone.

She picked up.

"I assume you saw it," Sebastián said, his voice calm.

Veronica's jaw clenched. "He just ruined himself."

Sebastián chuckled. "Oh, no. We are about to ruin him."

Veronica exhaled slowly. "Make sure it's permanent."

Sebastián's voice turned deadly smooth. "Consider it handled."

She hung up and took a sip of her now lukewarm espresso.

J.R. thought he was untouchable.

He was about to learn just how wrong he was.

Veronica perched at the edge of a sleek glass desk, one manicured finger tapping against the polished aluminum frame of her laptop. The city lights spilled through the floor-to-ceiling windows of her penthouse office, reflecting off the pristine, impossibly thin device resting in front of her.

With a swipe of her hand, the screen came to life, revealing a cascade of real-time sales data, engagement metrics, and book rankings. Veronica's gaze sharpened as she took in the numbers—some rising, some slipping just below the threshold where influence truly mattered.

She tapped her screen again.

The live dashboard blinked, updating in an instant. Liz and J.R.'s little rebellion was making noise, but noise wasn't power. Not yet.

A smirk played at the corner of her mouth as she reached for her wireless noise-canceling headphones, slipping them on with the same practiced ease as a final accessory. The moment the world went silent, her focus sharpened.

Now, she could work.

With a flick of her fingers, she started reshaping the conversation, the algorithms, the narrative itself.

Because Veronica didn't just follow the numbers.

She controlled them.

J.R. watched the internet explode.

His post had gone viral.

Authors were reposting it, from Mastodon to Bluesky to LinkedIn and Reddit, readers were demanding answers, and publishing executives were scrambling to do damage control.

Then his inbox lit up.

| Stratos Publishing: “Effective immediately, your contract is terminated.”|

| His agent: “I can’t work with you anymore. Good luck.”|

| A literary journalist: “Would you be open to an interview?”|

J.R. exhaled.

He had burned every bridge.

Now, there was no going back.

Liz’s voice came through the phone.

“We’re going to fight back, aren’t we? We’re not going to give in right?”

J.R. grinned, despite everything.

“Oh yeah.”

Chapter 18: The Last Move

Liz and J.R. had nothing left to lose.

Their careers were already destroyed.

Their names were tarnished.

But their voices?

Still theirs.

And if they were going to fall, they would take the system down with them.

J.R. sat across from Liz in her apartment, a laptop between them, a press release open on the screen.

“You sure about this?” Liz asked, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

J.R. met her eyes. “We tell everything. No half-truths.”

Liz nodded, swallowing hard.

Then, she started typing.

Veronica watched the story unfold in real time.

Liz and J.R. had just released the single most damning exposé on publishing ever written.

They had evidence—screenshots, email chains, documented cases of review manipulation and author suppression.

And worse?

It was catching fire.

Veronica exhaled, long and slow.

She had spent years building this empire.

But the problem with empires?

They were always one spark away from burning.

Her phone rang.

Sebastián.

“We have a problem,” he said, voice tight.

Veronica closed her eyes. “I know.”

For the first time in her career…

She had no way to stop what was coming.

The fallout was swift.

Stratos Publishing released a public statement, denying everything.

Readers turned against the industry, calling for more transparency.

Major authors started coming forward, admitting that they, too, had played the game.

But the most shocking part?

Liz’s book was reinstated.

Not by the industry.

By the readers.

They demanded it.

And for the first time in a long time…

The industry had to listen.

J.R. sat next to Liz as they watched the numbers climb.

They had told the truth.

And it had set them free.

Liz turned to him, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“So… what do we do now?”

J.R. grinned.

“We write.”

The right way.

The way we always should have.

The Last Page?

Veronica sat at her desk, watching the empire she had built begin to shift.

She wasn’t finished.

Not yet.

Because if there was one thing she knew about publishing…

It always adapted.

And so would she.

Veronica took a slow sip of wine and opened a blank document.

If the game had changed?

Then she would simply write new rules.

Epilogue: The Illusion is Broken, But the Fight Isn’t Over

Publishing wasn’t fixed overnight.

It never would be.

But something had shifted.

Authors started questioning.

Readers started demanding better.

And for Liz and J.R.?

They had lost everything.

But they had also won something greater.

Their voices.

Their truth.

And this?

This was only the beginning.

What happens when the illusion fades?

Liz thought she understood the game—the five-star rating system, the quiet battles authors fought for visibility, the illusion of success carefully maintained by those in power. But she was wrong.

Because the rules are changing.

Star ratings are no longer the key to success. Algorithms have taken over, deciding which books are seen, which stories matter, and which voices disappear. As traditional publishing loses control, a new power emerges—one that could reshape the industry forever.

It starts with a whisper—a system unlike any other. A strategy built not on ratings, but on something more powerful. The S.O.L.L. System.

But in a world where control is everything, new ideas are dangerous. And those profiting from

the current system will do anything to keep it from changing.

📖 Continue the journey in Chasing Stars—where the battle for visibility turns into a fight for survival.

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About Em Green

Em Green writes unconventional, human-centered stories that blur the lines between cultures, identities, and genres. She's just as comfortable unraveling mysteries on Seoul's side streets as she is diving deep into the tangled emotions of people who don't fit in neat categories. Her writing invites readers to slow down, stay curious, and embrace the unexpected connections that form when romance, suspense, and self-discovery collide.

With a storyteller's instinct and a traveler's heart, Em bridges the gap between generations—remembering a time before the internet while thriving in a world that lives online. Her works aren't just stories; they're conversations. Conversations with readers who are tired of hype that feels hollow, and are

ready for hype that means something. Every page is a quiet rebellion against the predictable, daring readers to feel more, wonder more, and look beyond what’s in front of them.